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THE SOURCE AND ÆSTHETIC VALUE OF PERMANENCY IN ART AND LITERATURE.

MODERN man has a prejudice against himself. Nowhere does he assert this prejudice so much as in æsthetic theory and criticism. Ask him by what test he determines the greatness of art and literature. He will answer: 'By the test of time; by the power of art and literature to yield perennial charm. Do not the Hebrew prophets and poets endure? Do not Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare endure? Do not Raphael, Michelangelo, and Beethoven endure? Great art is immortal.' Ask him now from what source great art and literature derive their perennial charm. He will answer: 'Not from the native and unaided faculties of the human soul; these are the source of the trivial and the fleeting. The perdurable in art and literature is, literally, *extra-human*. It is not in obedience to mere literary conventions that, for example, the Hebrew prophets proclaim their utterances to be the word of the Lord, and themselves but the mouth-pieces of the God of Israel; or that again Homer and Milton invoke the aid of the gods and Muses in the accomplishing of their poetic tasks. Inspiration, as it is called, is real and vital. Human nature in itself, uninspired from without, is unequal to the task of creating the permanently satisfying in art and literature. Enduring art is impersonal.'

Man's prejudice against himself will have it so. Great art is immortal, permanently fresh, and satisfying to a thousand generations; and the permanently fresh and satisfying in art and literature is *extra-human*, impersonal. One may readily attempt to remove this prejudice. One may appeal, confidently, no doubt, to philosophy, to poetry, to nature herself. Nothing in art or life is good or super-excellent, one may say, except in so far as it is valued or loved: nothing in art or life is trivial or fleeting, except in so far as it is appreciated slightly, or divorced absolutely from human interests: nothing in art or life endures, except in so far as it satisfies the permanent or vital functions of human

nature. Or, one may say, a moment of conscious sentient existence, if only a moment, is sufficient unto itself, and of imperishable value. But if philosophy gain no advantage, one may appeal to art or literature itself—to poetry :

“ Because the rose must fade
Shall I not love the rose ?
Because the summer shade
Passes when winter blows,
Shall I not rest me there
In the cool air ?”

Are not philosophy and poetry convincing enough ! Then must one appeal last of all to the ever fresh sense of the beauty of the new born day. The beauty of the morning comes as no other comes—immediately, directly, as a ‘ gift ’ of the air, and the woods, and the sea, and the hills, and the sky : earth-born indeed, but free, pervasive, joyous, imperishable !

To be fresh and satisfying to a thousand generations—is that the test of the super-excellent in art and literature ? There seems to be no doubt about it ; both creator and critic submit that really great art and literature yield perennial charm. Grant that it is so, and that, despite man’s prejudice against himself, the greatness of art and literature is wholly human ; still creator and critic insist upon differing as to the source and æsthetic value of the art and literature which possess perennial charm. The qualities of art and literature, they submit, are only as enduring as their sources. The formalist, on the one hand, insists that the formal qualities of art and literature are their essential and permanent qualities. Appreciation of these qualities is indeed difficult ; yet the beauties they yield have their source in the perdurable faculties of human nature—in the faculties which, as Kant would say, give ‘ form ’—space and time relations—to objects in nature or in art. The technician, on the other hand, exalts in art and literature, those qualities which afford delight by way of skill in invention or dexterity in workmanship. As long as man is man he can never lose his interest in the charm of ideal, even if sometimes mechanical, treatment of theme. The delight in that must be perennial. The impressionist in turn submits that man’s interest in what yields vivid or choice sensation shall never fail ;

delight in delicacy, or splendor, or harmony of color and of tone, in visions of fair women and brave men, in 'spectacles,' as Plato would say, of pomp and circumstance and power, is perdurable as the senses and imagination are perdurable. Finally, the expressionist for his part insists that what men shall never cease to care for in art and literature is—to use Arnold's formula for the source of the enduring quality of Homer's poetry—the profound and beautiful application of ideas to life, or, to put it in the language of the criticism of painting, the ideal treatment of noble themes. Noble themes, what are they? What, the expressionist, replies, but happy scenes of domestic life, great events in history, and the exalting thoughts and emotions that give life its consecration and its light! As these, in virtue of their absolute worth in the conduct of life, are everlasting in charm and interest; so the art and literature which embody them must remain permanently fresh and satisfying.

How plausible now to submit that if the greatness of art and literature be wholly human, the art and literature which possess in equal degree all possible æsthetic qualities, artistic, technical, sensuous, and moral, shall be immortal! Yet it would not be so. Art may possess in perfection all æsthetic qualities, and, nevertheless, fail to win us forever. The noblest Greek sculpture, for example, cloys by its very perfection. Not by possessing in supreme degree any single æsthetic quality or qualities do art and literature remain permanently fresh and satisfying. It is natural, no doubt, to suppose that the higher or the nobler the creative faculty or source of given æsthetic qualities, the greater and more enduring must be the art which possesses these given qualities. It is not so. Perfection in art has nothing to do with permanency, and permanency nothing to do with masterful execution in workmanship, with lofty inspiration with depth of conception, or with exalting emotion. Art and literature possess perennial charm only when their strictly æsthetic qualities, formal, technical, sensuous, and moral, sustain a peculiar relation to the vital functions of our being. There is not in this, as on first view it may seem, a subtle or ingenious doctrine of Naturalism. Æsthetic theory and criticism never will be sane and responsible until judg-

ments upon the truth and worth of art and literature are, as in morals, based upon knowledge of the nature and functions of human personality *in its integrity*. From the point of view of the whole man, the vital functions of human nature are, certainly, somewhat physical; they are, however, as characteristically spiritual. To put the matter once again, as before: *Art and literature possess perennial charm only when their strictly æsthetic qualities sustain a peculiar relation to the vital functions of our being*. But how so?

Realize adequately that what is nearest to us, that what is permanently with us, is the sense of the material and spiritual reality of things (of the earth, the sea, the sky, and of our own bodies, our own souls), or, as they say in the criticism of painting, the sense of form and movement. The art which conveys directly—‘presents,’ not ‘represents’—form and movement shall have a permanently fresh value. I do not say that it shall be the most winning art, or the most deeply satisfying to this or that individual, to this or that age; but that it shall have permanently fresh value. For art and literature aim at the ideal enhancement of life for its own sake. This they secure by way of three modes of æsthetic appreciation. There is the mode of appreciation which cares for nothing in a work of art except formal and technical beauties—for ideal treatment of the theme. The vulgar, Mr. Whistler tells us, cannot attain to it. There is, again, the mode of appreciation which cares for nothing in a work of art except the ‘ideas,’ or noble themes and attractive ideals it embodies. The great number of the highly cultivated, despite their culture, Mr. Berenson tells us, never care for the essential in art as art, but only for depth of conception and attractiveness of ideal—for the noble and beautiful application of ideas to life. It is only to this mode of æsthetic appreciation that the dictum, *De gustibus non est disputandum*, can apply; to the mode which exalts in art the preference for what is worth while in life. Such a mode of appreciation in different ages, and amongst different peoples, necessarily is forever changing its standard. The first mode, however, based as it is on primordial sensational impressions, and on the perception of relations amongst sensible elements, is relatively permanent; and to those who have capacity for the

appreciation of formal values in art, is always pleasing. There is, finally, a mode of æsthetic appreciation which may function either independently of the other two modes, or in conjunction with them. It is a mode which cares for everything in a work of art, whether formal or expressive, that by immediate presentation conveys to our faculties the material and spiritual reality of things. A work of art, a statue, or a novel, may be artistically winning or ravishing, or morally uplifting, but unless it is also directly life-enhancing, as music, for example, is immediately life-enhancing, its charm shall cease the moment its 'beauty' has been felt or its 'ideas' comprehended. These modes of æsthetic appreciation may be called, for purposes of treatment or identification, respectively the artistic, the moral, and the vitalistic. To escape abstractness in exposition, nothing can be better than simple illustration of the artistic, the moral, and the vitalistic modes of æsthetic appreciation, from sculpture, painting, music, and literature.

Standing before Myron's statue of the 'Discobolos,' one may take the æsthetic attitude either of the formalist or of the moralist; one may look in this statue either for a direct presentation of the structural (formal) beauty of the human body, or for some representation of the dignity (moral idea) of the human body as 'the temple of the soul.' As a formalist, one cares for the intrinsic beauty of grace of line in the poise of head and trunk and limb, or for the exquisite modeling which brings to the eye all the beauties of tone and texture, or for dexterous display of art in the treatment of theme. All these, however, the moralist will tell one are not final goods. One must care for the idea which these do but body forth, the idea of the dignity of the human body, or of the glory of manhood in its day of strength and vigor. The appeal in this case is not to the sensibility but to the moral imagination: the preference in this case is not for what is intrinsically beautiful, but for what is extrinsic to the work of art itself, for what is valuable to the heart, or good in the conduct of life. But the vitalistic mode of appreciation gives one in this case an immediate realization of the material and spiritual significance of the human body—the utmost sense in one's own body and soul, of form

and movement. A Greek youth is preparing, *as we actually feel in our own bodies*, to throw to the farthest distance a quoit. In a moment one is in his place, *actually realizing in sensation, organic, muscular, and peripheral*, his attitude, the tension of his whole being. One has an immediate sense of an increase of impulse, capacity, faculty of the will, to cope with life and things; one has an outflow of vital spirits. It is a moment directly life-communicating. If one feels at all according to the vitalistic mode in the presence of this statue, one feels in one's own body and person, immediately, inwardly—not reflectively—"our manhood's prime vigor." If Myron's 'Discobolos' ever fail us, it will not do so because it has lost its formal and expressive beauties, but because our own vital function—the inward sense of life itself—has failed. If that never fail us, the 'Discobolos' may lose its artistic and moral values, but it shall still remain permanently fresh and satisfying on the ten-thousandth look.

Again: The essential in painting as an art is not the intrinsic beauty of splendor, or of harmony of color, or of ideality in the manner of composition, but, as in sculpture, the direct communicating of the reality of form and movement. We must be sure of our problem. We are not concerned with what an individual or an age will prefer or love most in a painting, but with what shall remain permanently fresh and satisfying to all individuals and ages. This again is the vitalistic or tonic value in a painting. I take an extreme case. Botticelli will disappoint one immensely if one looks in his work for charming harmonies of color, for delicacy of feeling, for depth of conception, or for ideal types of humanity. He is not a formalist; he is not an expressionist. He is, however, a master in pure presentation of form by way of masses that convey the sense of resistance and of life, and of movement by way of lineal decoration. Realize how supremely, for example, his 'Birth of Venus' arouses one's vital functions to the keenest activity. The tossing of the goddess's tresses conveys to one directly, possibly by line only, the sense of body and of life; the fluttering of the draperies and the dancing of the waves cause in one's own body and soul the very sense of an outflow of vital spirits. It all comes to one as a gift from

the work of art itself ; so supreme is it in the immediate presentation of form and movement. In this connection, I am anxious to add just a word about Michelangelo. He has done in painting what the Greeks did so masterfully in sculpture ; he has given us the direct presentation of the life-enhancing values of form and movement in the nude. That old ideal of the highest moral energy in action or in repose (*mens pulchra in corpore pulchro*) is fulfilled in Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Where else indeed shall we realize—directly as we realize the invigorating breath of the salt sea and the serene beauty of the blue sky—where else shall we realize the energy of men and gods, the material and spiritual significance of the finite and the infinite ! Much in Michelangelo may fail to win us, much more in Botticelli will repel us ; and though Duccio, Perugino, and Raphael ever seem to be beloved, and though Giorgione, Titian, and Tintoretto ever charm the senses, yet so long as we do not become dehumanized, or lose our inward sense of material presence and of personality, we shall not only receive more from Michelangelo and Botticelli than from the Florentine and Venetians, but also return a thousand times to the former with the same joy. The delights they yield us are perennial.¹

Once more : the source of the permanently fresh and satisfying quality of music and literature is not their formal and technical beauties, but their power to stimulate directly the sensibility with concords of sweet sounds, and with fair images, or through thought and feeling to stimulate ideated sensations of form and movement. Life, as we say, is itself so much the nature of music that it is directly life-communicating, life-enhancing. This fact is too obvious to need further elaboration. But what shall we say of literature ? In what instance has it supreme vitalistic values as distinguished from simple artistic and from moral values ? Certainly not in the drama ; certainly not in the novel ; certainly not in reflective or in romantic poetry. Where then ? Only, as I conceive it, in lyric poetry—in the poetry, for instance, of

¹ A convincing putting of this mode of criticism may be found in Van Dyke's *Art for Art's Sake*, Chap. VI, and in Berenson's *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, from both of which, in the matter of painting, I have borrowed much.

Burns, of Shelly, or of Browning. I do not say that vitalistic values are not present in the other species of literature. I do say, however, that in the drama, the novel, in reflective and romantic poetry, vitalistic values do not exist in a supreme degree ; whereas in lyric poetry of the highest order they do thus exist. As far as Shakespeare's drama, for example, is valued for its 'ethos,' as far as his embodiment of conscience and his representation of an inexorable order are concerned, it is conceivable that the art of Shakespeare may fail. When our preferences in art are identical with our preferences in the conduct of life, the drama as embodying only these will fail the moment our ideals or intellectual interests change. For the same reason the novel of whatever kind may fail ; so too, reflective and romantic poetry. But lyric poetry, if true to its genius, shall never fail. For in its supremest moments, it is the Genius of Song affirming the good and joy of life. What is the real secret, for example, of Browning's 'power' in his Dramatic Lyrics, as compared with the more 'æsthetic charm' and 'sensuous beauty' of Tennyson's poetry—what, indeed, but the fact that, despite crabbed verse and moral ideas, Browning 'lilts' us into a lust of life, and into the sense of our infinite capacity for affirming life and coping with its demands ? Men and women in all ages shall return to Browning, not because, as is said, he is "the subtlest assertor of the soul in song," nor because his ideals have high moral worth and warrant—not because he is "a great religious and philosophical teacher," but because he is a pure fount of inspiration to those who love life and who in the very storm and stress of life would love it more abundantly. The vitalistic values in poetry have in his Dramatic Lyrics their supremest realization.

It is not the business of the critic of the fine arts to supply him who would create with rules and recipes, or with methods of inspiration. It is the critic's business rather to discover all the excellences of art and literature, to reveal the sources of these excellences, and thus to save men and women in his own generation from the so vulgar sin of spiritual pride in their own work and joys,

by welcoming every work of art that is genuinely human and in its degree lovely or exalting. Excellent and necessary, then, as they are in a work of art, formal, technical, sensuous, and moral values in themselves cannot secure for art and literature the qualities of perennial charm. Only the masterful presentation of vitalistic values, by its causing us in our own bodies and souls to realize much more vividly and directly than does reality itself the material and spiritual significance of men and things, can render art fresh and satisfying to succeeding ages. Men and women of to-day are anxiously seeking for the secret of such supreme creative functioning, as if art were a lost craft and by diligent searching might be recovered. If art absolute indeed is lost, nothing that men may do can avail. They must wait for the bird of life again to begin his early morning song.

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